

Residents asked to support laws to halt water exports

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Victoria-area residents were asked Wednesday night to become advocates for state water laws that would protect Victoria County and other parts of rural Texas from water-export projects like the planned Lower Guadalupe Water Supply Project.

The plea came during a meeting sponsored by Victoria's D.M. O'Connor Ranches and designed to raise public awareness of the environmental and economic threats to Victoria County that the O'Connors, descendants of a pioneer ranching family, believe to be associated with the Lower Guadalupe project.

The project, which is included in the state water plan, would supplement San Antonio's water supply with Guadalupe River water taken near Tivoli and underground water from Victoria, Refugio and Goliad counties. The project is scheduled to come online in about 2012.

"Victoria, Goliad and Refugio counties are ground zero for one the most ambitious water export projects in Texas history," said Bill Jones, a spokesman for O'Connor Ranches and moderator for Wednesday's event. "Many people in the surrounding counties are concerned that massive water exports pose a serious threat to our economic and environmental future."

The meeting, held at Victoria Country Club, was attended by about 200 people, including invited community leaders, public officials and private citizens, as well as members of the general public who sought reserved seats to the event.

Jones said several public opinion surveys have conclusively shown that people in the Victoria area strongly oppose water exports from the region. Nonetheless, he said, plans for the "multi-billion gallons per year" export project continue to move forward.

Project developers, Jones said, are enlisting the help of state lawmakers and regulatory agencies to expedite the project by changing state laws - "put in place to protect us and our right to water" - that would hinder its development.

But, Jones said, "rural Texas has a voice in all this. And that voice is getting louder. It is our hope that after this evening's presentation you, too, will become a voice for rural Texas."

During his talk, Jones enumerated some of the examples of opposition to the planned exports.

"County courts in Victoria, Calhoun, Refugio and Goliad have adopted resolutions opposing water exports until the science can be quantified and the risks properly assessed," he said. "Agricultural groups, like the Independent Cattlemen's Association and the Texas Farm Bureau, oppose water exports from rural Texas. Environmental groups, like the Coastal Conservation Association and the National Wildlife Federation, have serious concerns that enormous water export projects threaten the health of our bays and estuaries."

A technical analysis of the project was presented by a panel of experts assembled by the O'Connors.

The experts concluded that there are too many unknowns regarding the specifics of the project and its impact for residents of the Victoria area to feel comfortable about it.

Water policy analyst Mark Rose of Bastrop, former general manager of the Lower Colorado River Authority, said scientific studies into the effects of the project need to be completed before lawmakers take action to advance its development.

"There certainly is no reason to rush," Rose said, adding that Wednesday's meeting was not only a call for action, but a call for more information.

Jim Blackburn, a Houston environmental attorney, author and environmental law instructor at Rice University, explained that three bills - House Bills 2915, 2541 and 2542 - authored by San Antonio state Rep. Robert Puente and now before the Legislature, would remove protections offered to the Victoria area under the state's interbasin transfer law.

The law is designed to regulate exports of river water from one river basin to another - in this case, from the Guadalupe to the San Antonio river basin - in order to ensure that the water needs of the contributing area, typically a rural one, aren't disregarded in favor of the needs of the receiving area, typically a metropolitan one.

Rose said the O'Connors began investigating the project over two years ago when they were approached by its developers and asked to provide water for the project.

Brian Rask, a senior project hydrologist with Halepaska and Associates of Denver, Colo., and Ric Bowers, a professional engineer with Groundwater Resources of Houston, said the project would compete for groundwater with the city of Victoria during droughts.

The result could be big drops in the level of the water table, Bowers said.

Bowers said groundwater pumping during droughts could also draw saltwater into local wells, hurting the water quality. It could also put a stop to the usual groundwater discharges into the Guadalupe River, resulting in less water being available for the environmental needs of San Antonio Bay, he said.

Victoria County Judge Don Pozzi asked those attending the meeting to support the establishment of a groundwater conservation district in Victoria County. Victoria Mayor Will Armstrong also spoke in support of a groundwater district.

The district would be able to establish rules, including pumping limits and well-spacing requirements, that would offer some protections to the local aquifer and those who are now using it.

The Lower Guadalupe project would be built by the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority, the San Antonio River Authority and the San Antonio Water System.

After the meeting, attendee Phil Weynand of San Antonio, project manager for SARA, agreed there are a lot of unknowns about the project, but said the partners are taking pains to answer questions with thorough and accurate studies.